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A study of compliment responses in English: a case of North Cyprus

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Abstract

Individuals often apply the sociolinguistic norms of their primary language to the patterns of response in a second language. The purpose of this study is to assess the compliment responses of native and non-native Turkish ELT students in North Cyprus. The data is collected through the use of written discourse completion tasks (DCT), with a set of six different scenarios in which the students are asked to respond to specific compliments. Six native and six non-native Turkish ELT students participated in the study. The results showed that, there was significant difference in English compliment strategies between native and non-native Turkish ELT students.

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1. Introduction

Individuals often apply the sociolinguistic norms of their primary language to the patterns of response in a second language. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as pragmatic transfer and can be positive when L1-L2 normative speech patterns match, or negative when they clash. The problem is intercultural communications can be seriously hindered among native and non native speakers as a results of pragmatic transfer (Rizk, 2003).

It is claimed that any understanding of sociolinguistic elements, including the contextualization of compliment responses, requires a view of the link between ethnography and the development of linguistic skills. Because communications occur within social contexts and are defined by societal forces, assessing the context in which responses occur is imperative to identifying the processes influencing communications (Ball, 2005; Centeno et al, 2007).

Huth (2007) stated that sociolinguistics define a significant view of compliment use as a function of social interactions that are rather culturally-shaped than merely universal. Compliments are used as part of interpersonal

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communications in some cultures, including the American culture, as a means of expressing acceptance and as a method for starting communications (e.g. "You look nice today."). While the most common culturally defined response to a compliment in the United States is to simply acknowledge it, by stating "Thank you," people of other cultures may not respond in the same manner to a compliment (Bamlund and Araki, 1985). In some cultures, denying the compliment is one way in which members of the culture acknowledge the compliment. In others, a lack of response is appropriate, especially if the compliment is made by a man and directed at a woman (Cedar, 2006).

Koven (2004) asserts that it is the sociolinguistic factors impacting intercultural communications that shape the correlation between language ideologies and functionality. This corresponds with the need to assess pragmatics as they influence the function of language.

Al Falasi (2007) argued that the effective and appropriate communication between people with different primarily languages requires the utilization of both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Researchers maintain that in EFL classes, educators often focus on linguistic knowledge, rather than pragmatic knowledge, which can result in pragmatic failure in the practical application of language (Al Falasi, 2007). Pragmatic transfer is of the mechanism through which pragmatic failure occurs, and refers to the transfer of primary language knowledge into secondary language usage. El Samaty (2005) mentions one factor that might influence pragmatic transfer and that is learners' perception of "what constitutes a language specific or a universal issue"

One of the underlying reasons for differences in primary and secondary language references related to compliments and responses is that the purpose and function of compliments vary significantly and the communication of compliments required an understanding of the context in which it occurs (Wolfson, 1989; Cedar, 2006). Rather than this form of language being informational or referential, compliments and responses are affective and social, and the specificity of the compliment and response is linked to cultural perspectives (Cedar, 2006). Though language instruction often focuses on linguistic features, the pragmatics of language relates directly to functionality in compliments and compliment responses. Cedar (2006) recognized that the understanding of studies of how native and non-native speakers address the issue of compliments in English provides a basis for English language pedagogy, which is supported by models for cross-cultural communication.

Manes and Wolfson (1981) suggested that one other consideration in the development of a study of factors influencing the pragmatics of compliment response is the nature of the interaction in which the compliment occurs. In concert, Gumperz (1982) also maintained that the social acceptability of the use of correct language is also linked to the ability to identify the purpose of the language. The purpose of the compliment, the goal of the language use, is an important consideration in defining the response. Learners of a second language must understand how to be both linguistically competent, then, and also communicatively competent, demonstrating a understanding of "linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation" (Gumperz 1982, p. 209). This underscores the complexity of providing instruction for second language learners in compliment/response scenarios and demonstrating an understanding of language conventions.

This study which takes place in North Cyprus assesses the compliment responses of native Turkish ELT students and non-native Turkish ELT students, in order to determine to what extent responses to compliment patterns are linked to L1 or L2 pragmatic knowledge. In this non-native English context researchers have recognized that the sequence and pattern of compliment responses is often standardized within a given culture. Understanding the standardization of compliment responses and the use of pragmatic first language knowledge through a comparative view of respondents with differing primary languages can be beneficial to contextualizing the problem of pragmatic transfer.

A number of the studies utilized by Al Falasi could be integrated into a study of native Turkish ELT speakers and non-Native Turkish ELT speakers as a means of identifying the application of normative speech patterns of the primary language to compliment responses in English (See Herbert, 1986; Wolfson, 1986; and Rizk, 2003).

2. Methodology

The research tools for this study include the use of discourse completion tasks, a set of six different scenarios in which the students are asked to respond to specific compliments. In this assessment, the scenarios were devised to demonstrate variations in responses that could occur in the presence of complimentary discourse.

Subsequent to this task and assessment process, interviews will also be conducted that provide for variations in responses and also help to show why the students selected the responses they did. This can give insight into the data that is collected and the purpose or function of the response (e.g. was it related to pragmatic transfer) (Ishihara, 2003).

The research participants for this study are 6 native Turkish ELT students and 6 non-native Turkish ELT students. The students will be asked to participate in discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and subsequent interviews and comparisons will be made of the outcomes of their tasks. This research methodology is based on studies by Al Falasi (2007) who conducted similar studies of Arabic learners of English through the use of discourse completion tasks. The comparison of English language responses for non-native and native Turkish ELT learners is the basis for this study.

3. Findings

The students will be provided with six different scenarios. The following is an example from the six scenarios that can be utilized:

Scenario #1: You made a dish that you brought to a dinner for students in your class. One student comes up to you and says: "That dish was very good." How do you respond?

Student responses are collected and assessed in comparison to traditional responses noted as standard, "formulaic" English response (e.g. "Thank you"). Assessments of the native and non-native Turkish students are analyzed for each of six response scenarios.

In order to examine the similarities and difference between native and non-native ELT speakers of English the data collected from two groups through the discourse completion task will be presently analyzed for the six scenarios. The analysis will be based on Herbert's Taxonomy of compliment responses (Table 1).

Table 1. Herbert's Taxonomy of Compliment responses (Herbert 1986, p.79)

Response Type	Example
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Nonacceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

Scenario 1:

You have just finished presenting your research paper. At the end of the class (When you were just leaving the classroom), one of your classmates says: "You did an excellent job! I really enjoyed your presentation." You answer:

_____.

Number of NSs	Responses	Agreement
5	‘Thank you’	Appreciation Token
1	‘Thank you I enjoyed yours too’	Comment Acceptance
Number of NNSs	Responses	Agreement
5	‘Thank you. I worked very hard and tried my best’ or ‘Thank you I put a lot of time and effort into it’	Praise Upgrade
1	‘Thank you’	Appreciation Token

Scenario 2:

You have some friends and relatives over for coffee and cake that you baked. Someone says: ‘Tastes Yummy!’ You answer: _____.

Number of NSs	Responses	Agreement
4	‘Thank you’	Appreciation Token
1	‘I think so too’	Praise Upgrade
1	‘Thank you would you like some more’	Comment Acceptance
Number of NNSs	Responses	Agreement
6	‘I like to bake it’s a hobby of mine’ or ‘I bake this cake all the time, it’s my favourite’ or ‘Thank you it’s me baked it’	Comment Acceptance

Scenario 3:

You were shopping for a skirt and a stranger (male) approaches you and says : ‘ This would look amazing on you ‘
You answer: _____.

Number of NSs	Responses	Agreement
4	‘Thanks’	Appreciation Token
2	‘Thanks. I’ll try it on’	Comment Acceptance
Number of NNSs	Responses	Agreement
6	No Acknowledge	Non-Agreement (silence)

Scenario 4:

You were shopping for a skirt and a stranger (female) approaches you and says : ‘This would look amazing on you!’
You answer: _____.

Number of NSs	Responses	Agreement
3	'Thank you'	Appreciation Token
2	'Thank you I think so too'	Comment Acceptance
1	'Thanks'	Praise Upgrade
Number of NNSs	Responses	Agreement
3	'Thank you'	Appreciation Token
2	'Thank you I'll buy it then'	Comment Acceptance
1	'Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it'	Praise Upgrade

Scenario 5:

Some friends are over at your house. One of them looks at a clock hanging on the wall and says: 'I love your clock. It looks great in your living room!' You answer:___

_____.

Number of NSs	Responses	Agreement
3	'Thanks'	Appreciation Token
3	'Thank you I think so too'	Comment Acceptance
Number of NNSs	Responses	Agreement
6	'I think so too. I try to get things that go well with the room.', 'Thank you .I got it from Ikea.', 'I bought it when I was in Paris. It's a very expensive antique!., and ' Thanks. I bought it from London.'	Comment Acceptance

Scenario 6:

You're wearing a new shirt and a colleague looks at you and says: ' This shirt looks great on you! Blue is a great colour for you'. You answer:_____.

Number of NSs	Responses	Agreement
6	'Thanks. I like the colour blue.', 'Thanks, that's what they said about this colour', and 'Blue is my favourite colour.'	Comment Acceptance
Number of NNSs	Responses	Agreement

6	Thank you .I wasn't sure at first but I like it now.', 'Thank you it's my favourite colour.', 'That is my colour I always wear blue.' and 'Thank you I love blue too much.'	Comment Acceptance
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4. Conclusion

This study is based the investigation of pragmatic transfer of compliment responses in Turkish learners of English compared with the data from native speakers of English. The findings of the study show that NNSs of English did not produce target-like compliment responses. Their cultural knowledge affected their responses. They literally translated Turkish formulaic expressions used in compliment responses and these expressions were not always suitable for the compliment given in English. First and second scenarios show that how non-native speakers tend to not accept compliments without justification, whereas as native speakers can. The NNSs responses to scenario three are gender related confirming prior studies such as Cedar (2006). The NSs pattern does not put any social-distance and still does not change but NNSs pattern changes to silence. Based on the interviews very clear that, there are distinct differences on responding the compliments between two cultures. NSs stated that in their culture, the compliments as a way of being polite and accept compliments with pleasure. Whereas, in Turkish culture people don't accept a compliment if it comes from a stranger, especially from a man. This cultural difference puts a barrier for their language learning. The answers to scenario four also shows that the culture affect the responses. Half of the NNSs were offended by the compliment given from a male but they accepted the compliment when it was from a female. On the other hand native speakers of English were comfortable when they received a compliment either from a male or a female. Also in Scenario 5 and 6, the pragmatic transfer can be seen clearly. Both NNSs and NSs responses to this scenario were agreement. However all NSs responded by giving short answers, but NNSs answered this scenario by giving explanations which in their culture this is the way to respond to this kind of compliment. These findings show that NNSs are affected by their own culture in responding to compliments. This study exposed that it is not enough to build learners' linguistic competence and it will be beneficial to develop their sociocultural, which will in turn develop their understanding of the frames of interaction and rules of politeness within the target culture.

As a result, to prevent the misunderstanding of the responses to the compliments between native speakers of English and Turkish learners of English;

First; it is important to be aware of the pragmatic transfer so, when designing textbooks and syllabus, cultural differences should be taken into consideration.

Second; the usage of authentic materials from the target language will be helpful

Third; focusing on learner centered activities, like role-play and real discussion will be beneficial for Turkish learners of English,

And finally, if it is possible invite native speakers of English into the classroom and let non-native ELT students have conversation with them or take non-native ELT students to the places which they can practice their English with native speakers of English.

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